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Lieutenant Governor Jim Risch

When *BW* sat down with Jim Risch, he was about to finish the shortest term as governor in Idaho's history, just seven months. And he looked tired. Small wonder; whether you agreed with him or not, Risch didn't waste time. He moved, as he put it, at "battle speed." Battle, indeed; he wrangled with lawmakers over his one-day special session, he wrangled with the feds over land use, and he wrangled with Democrat Larry LaRocco in the campaign for his current job. Find out why he couldn't believe that Dirk Kempthorne would replace Interior Secretary Gale Norton, why Democrats lost in November, and why he won't give advice to new Gov. Butch Otter.

It seemed like there was an awful lot of suspense about whether you'd re-file, when Kempthorne left, to run for governor, or stick with the race for your old job.



We made a decision shortly before Thanksgiving a year ago, that we weren't going to run for the job. Then of course, when this happened, I had about a day to make up my mind whether I wanted to do otherwise. We revisited the decision we made, the personal reasons, and decided we'd made a good decision. We decided that I would be governor for seven months, and do what I could.

I gotta tell you, after that May 2003 incident where [Kempthorne] was turned down for the [EPA administrator position], we then went through it twice more. And on two of those three occasions, we truly believed it was going to happen. And when I say "we," I mean Kempthorne, me, and most other people.

Then on Wednesday, March the 15, they handed me a note and said, "Can you become governor?" Which is a common occurrence. He was gone a lot. In one month I was governor more than he was. But it said he was going at 9:30 at night. And that was unusual. So [First Lady] Vicki and I were having dinner with he and Patricia and some others. And every time this had come up we've had a lot of discussions. So I thought he was probably going back to talk to him again. Because he knows George Bush, I'm sure Bush would give him an interview if he asked for it. Anyway, we had dinner that evening, and he got on an airplane, and we didn't talk about it.

I find that hard to believe, that you sat there and didn't talk about it.

Thursday morning I get a call from a reporter at Channel 2. He said, "We'd like to get your comment on the fact that Dirk Kempthorne is going to be appointed this afternoon as the secretary of the Interior." I laughed and said, "Where'd you get that from?" They said it came from an informed source inside the Department of Interior. I said, "Let me tell you: there are three people who know who's going to be the next secretary of the Interior: the President, the Vice President, and Karl Rove. If it's not one of them I'm not interested."

Then I went to lunch, came back, and there were three [message] slips. My secretary kept coming in and saying, "These media people keep calling."

I called Vicki and said, "Why don't you come on down here." Then Dirk called me. He said, "You've heard the news." I said, "Well, yeah."

I said, "Where'd you get this from?" He laughed and said, "I met with the President." I said, "Is there going to be a news conference?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Is the President going to be there?" And he said, "Yeah." So I said, "OK." I turned on the television and pretty soon, there he was, standing in the Oval Office with the President and I turned to Vicki and said, "Now I believe it."

Are there things you've done as governor that you wish you'd done differently?

I don't think any of them. I had a couple months to think about becoming the governor. We made the list of things I wanted to do, that I didn't have to do. They were people-driven. They were things that would make life better for Idahoans, that would help people. I can truthfully say I think we got done virtually everything we wanted to do. There's obviously other things. For instance, the drug czar. I've put that in motion. Is that finished? It will never be finished.

Have Democrats bought themselves some trouble by taking out moderate Republicans in the House this year?

There's no question about that. You've heard that the Legislature is more conservative than it was. I don't think there's any question about that. You know who caused that? The Democrats. They took out the more moderate Republicans.

You may not have been surprised by the outcome in the statewide races, but I think the Democratic Party candidates were surprised at some of their losses in those statewide races.

They always are. Every year they beat the drum, and tell themselves, "Idaho has changed, this is the year, we're going to do it." I've heard that since the 1960s. And it never happens. It always comes out the same. They've gotta be despondent. In 2006, with the tsunami that went across the country, and they couldn't pick up that First Congressional District seat. I think if I were them I'd go find another daytime job.

What, in your opinion, are they doing wrong?

I don't know. You can imagine a Republican trying to get elected up in the North End. There will never be another Republican elected in District 19. What are the Republicans doing wrong in District 19? What are they doing wrong? They're running, that's what.

The interesting thing is that [Democrats] picked up those legislative seats. The interesting thing is that they picked up those seats in districts adjacent to District 19. Well, duh. The state is growing. And when [new residents] come in here, we find demographically they're a lot like what's already here. So there's maybe 50 or 60 percent of them that lean to the right, and maybe 30 or 35 percent of them that lean to the left. They want to live in the North End. But there's no room left in the North End. So they live as close as they can.

Got any advice for Butch Otter?

Butch has been around a long time. He served a long time in the state Legislature. He's the longest-serving Lieutenant governor, he served a stint in Congress. He doesn't need my advice. I think it would be presumptuous to give him my advice.

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